



الهيئة العامة للسياحة والتراث الوطني  
Saudi Commission for Tourism & National Heritage  
scth.gov.sa

## Cultural Rock Arts in Himā Najrān, Saudi Arabia

### A SERIAL NOMINATION OF ROCK ART AND ROCK ART INSCRIPTION SITES

at Hima Wells, An Jamal, Dhibah, Minshaf, and Najd Khayran, near Najran  
Submitted by the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage as a  
proposal for inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage List as a Serial  
Nomination 2018 CE - 1439 AH

## NOMINATION DOCUMENT

## 2. Description

The nominated Cultural Rock Arts in Ḥimā Najrān is the core area of one of the largest rock art concentrations in the world. It is 47.5 km long and up to 15 km wide, with a perimeter of 85.90 km total length. However, it comprises only the densest concentration of the general region's rock art and rock inscription sites.

Other sites occur scattered beyond its limits. Nevertheless, most of the currently known 550 sites are within the nominated buffer zone and in that sense form part of the present application (see Maps 1 and 5). The six nominated sites are outstanding examples of the region's vast corpus of rock art and rock inscriptions, occurring in the buffer zone's southern part.

They have been singled out for full protection that consists of steel fences surrounding the sites and of supervision by local residents. It is proposed that all visitation of the Cultural Rock Arts in Ḥimā Najrān by members of the public be focused on these six specific sites.

### 2.a Description of Property

The Cultural Rock Arts in Ḥimā Najrān encompasses numerous cultural and historical values. It is located at an important nodal point of the ancient caravan routes of the Arabian Peninsula (*Arbach et al. 2015*). In avoiding the mountainous regions to the west, caravans from Yemen in the south to the interior were compelled to follow a narrow corridor along the western margins of the vast Rub' Al-Ḥālī (or Rub' Al Khālī) desert, the 'Empty Quarter'.

The wells at Bi'r Ḥimā offered the last supply of water on the way north, and the first after crossing the deserts on the way south. This intensive traffic channeled through the nominated Property is reflected in tens of thousands of rock inscriptions written in several scripts, and in at least one hundred thousand petroglyphs. Both features are preserved in pristine conditions.

The rock art provides a continuous record from the Neolithic period to the very present time, i.e. for a timespan of 7000 years or so (*Bednarik and Khan 2005*). It has only recently been discovered that in the Cultural Rock Arts in Ḥimā Najrān, rock art continued to be created, modified and venerated during the last 30 years (*Bednarik 2017a*). This is therefore one of very few places in the world, outside of Australia, where rock art expresses a living cultural tradition.

Moreover, the ethnographic record effectively extends for millennia into the past, through the myriad rock inscriptions. They occur in various scripts, such as the Al-Musmad alphabet of 29 letters, Aramaic-Nabatean, South-Arabian scripts, Thamudic and even

in Greek, as well as Arabian. All of these writings can be deciphered and they provide rich information about the world of their authors.

They also confirm historical events and several of them are precisely dated. Moreover, these inscriptions are an invaluable source of epigraphic understanding concerning the development of alphabetic writing. Such a rich and informative source of archaeological, epigraphic, historical and ethnographic information is of great scientific and cultural value.

However, underscored by the vast archaeological resources in the nominated area, found in the form of cairns, stone structures, interments, stone tool scatters and deep ancient wells. The caravan traffic was so intensive that a toll station once existed at 'Ān Jamal, one of the six sites nominated here. It is this intensive use, especially after the region's final desertification, that explains the extraordinary concentrations of rock art, one of the largest in the world, and of rock inscriptions.

However, as the designation Cultural Rock Arts in Ḥimā Najrān emphasizes, this is not just a vast rock art and rock inscription depository; it is the site of a living, continuing cultural tradition. The Bedouins living there are the descendants of some of the authors of the rock art and inscriptions, and the culture underwriting the rock art production still continues today. This is amply evident, for example in the use of the several millennia-old tribal markings called *wusūm* (singular *wasm*) that are still current today (*Khan 2000*), and through the continuing veneration of the fertility goddess *Alia*, both of which are prominent features in the Ḥimā rock art.

Moreover, the evidence from the Cultural Rock Arts in Ḥimā Najrān illustrates the interaction between people and nature, such as the response of the local population to the gradual lowering of the aquifer and the economic adjustments to the desertification. It thus represents an exceptional example of a traditional human settlement and land-use which is representative of a series of cultures, or human interaction with an environment that has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change.



*Figure 1. Two depictions of Alia, ancient goddess of love and fertility, at Bayḍā' site complex, Cultural Rock Arts in Ḥimā Najrān, site No. BYD03.*

### *2.a.i Environmental setting*

The Ḥimā area that is the subject of this serial nomination begins about 80 km north of Najrān, a town in the extreme south of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and near the Yemeni border. It extends from just south of Ḥimā to 40 km to the north along the eastern outliers of Jabal Al-Qāra, but at this stage excludes Jabal Al-Kawkab. To the east of Ḥimā lies the seemingly endless sea of sand aptly named Rub' al-Khālī, the Empty Quarter.

To its west is a succession of poorly accessible mountain ranges, beginning with nearby Jabal Al-Qāra and extending all the way to the coastal 'Asir ranges along the Red Sea. The majority of rock art and rock inscription sites covered by the Cultural Rock Arts in Ḥimā Najrān — the area described here as the buffer zone — occur along the eastern margins of Jabal Al-Qāra, a complex system of sandstone stacks dissected by canyons and sand-filled wādīs. The region's environment is highly arid today, with very sparse vegetation and minimal wildlife.

Meagre tree cover can be found in canyons that are subjected to sporadic flooding. Other vegetation consists of small shrubs and dormant small plants that are activated by rains. Episodic pools are rare in the entire region, but one occurs at al-Ḥuṣayba in a narrow gorge at jabal al-Kawkab.

The only other surface water in the Area is found in clay pans after rain falls. The area therefore continues to draw its primary water supply from the five ancient wells of Bi'r Ḥimā. The fauna of the wider Najrān region includes various birds, several reptiles, rodents, predators, and rare larger animals.

These have been subjected to much hunting. Rain falls are generally light and are most frequent from February to April, when 103 mm of the annual average precipitation of 132 mm tends to occur. Temperatures range from an annual average low of 16°C to an annual average high of 31°C, with an average annualized daily mean of 23°C.

Today's desert climate extends just a few millennia into the past as there is ample evidence that the region was much wetter in the past. In particular, the rock art of the Neolithic and early Bronze Age includes apparent depictions of species that could not possibly inhabit the region today. More directly, in various parts of the Cultural Rock Arts in Ḥimā Najrān, carbonate encrustation of the sandstone bedrock indicates the former presence of super-saturated pools of water.

Such a deposit has been dated at 'Ān Jamal (*Liritzis et al. 2013*). The canyons in the mountain massifs also provide evidence of greater flashfloods than are possible today, although that erosive activity may predate human presence. In the past the climate fluctuated considerably, between relatively moist and hyper-aridity.

The major moist interval of the final Pleistocene (the Würm), marked by grasslands and playa lakes in the Ḥimā region gave way to the aridity of the Last Glacial Maximum about 17,000 years ago. Of particular relevance is the Pleistocene palaeolake Mundafin, located in the western Rub' Al-Khālī c. 80 km northeast of Ḥimā. Conditions became gradually more moist between 15,000 and 9000 years ago, leading to the Neolithic wet phase that ended about 6000 years ago.



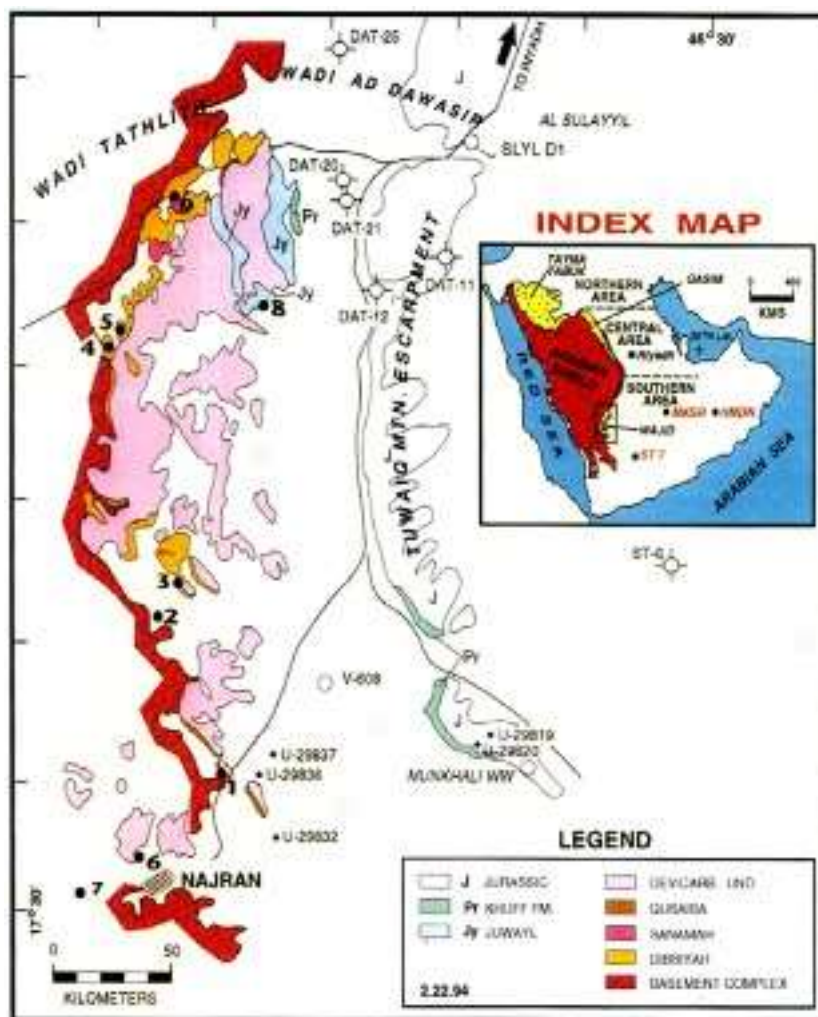


Figure 2. The geology of the region north of Najrān. Ḥimā is at location 1.

It was followed by a short arid period between 6000 and 5000 years before the present, leading to the final moist conditions of the late Holocene. Between 5000 and 3500 years ago, the lakes once again filled, in some cases surpassing previous levels. These optimum conditions did not last, but the arrival of the final aridity 3500 to 3000 years BP was not so much the result of climatic deterioration, but of a gradual lowering of aquifer level.

This led to the progressive final desertification marking the last 3000 years. In the Cultural Rock Arts in Ḥimā Najrān, the human reactions to the environmental conditions are perfectly recorded, in both the rock art and the rock inscriptions. Of particular importance to the hydrology of the Ḥimā area is the local geology.

Generally, the rocky mountain ranges, which can rise several hundred meters above the sand plains and wādīs, are composed of Wajid Sandstone. This is a permeable sedimentary rock facies of the Paleozoic that retains water poorly. Just south of Ḥimā, the underlying granite of the Precambrian Arabian Shield is exposed (Figure 2), and it is that

rock's low permeability that accounts for the raised aquifer at Ḥimā.

As the aquifer retreated underground during the first millennium BCE, the wells at Ḥimā had to be progressively deepened into the solid bedrock and they are now about 20 m deep. However, there were great differences in the lowering of water levels across Saudi Arabia; for instance at Jubbah, the aquifer is now 75 m below ground level. The Wajid Sandstone comprises several facies: the Sag and Qasim formations (Cambrian-Ordovician age), the Zarqa and Sarah formations (Late Ordovician to Early Silurian age), the Qalibah Formation of Early Silurian age, and the Unayzah Formation (Haushi Group) of late Carboniferous to Early Permian age (Evans *et al.* 1991).

## 2.a.ii Archaeology and Ethnography

Bī'r Ḥimā is an ancient Palaeolithic and Neolithic occupation zone that has been categorized as a Lower Palaeolithic or Oldowan site, although propositions concerning the presence of chopping and cobble tools specifically in this area remain to be verified. Nevertheless, Site No. 226-63 near Najrān to the south has yielded Mode 1 artefacts (Whalen and Pease 1992). The presence of Acheulian hand-axes and Mousterian implement types from the Cultural Rock Arts in Ḥimā Najrān

has been reported, e.g. at 'Ān Jamal and Sha'ib Hinmat (Bednarik and Khan 2005).

Elsewhere in Saudi Arabia, Acheulian tools have been attributed ages of c. 200,000 years by uranium-series dating (Whalen *et al.* 1982). Recently Mode 2 tools were reported from sites near the Red Sea coast, including specimens embedded in coral deposits c. 130,000 years old at wādī Dabsa, and chert tools encased in a lava flow near wādī Dhahaban that has been dated to c. 440,000 years (Sinclair 2017). Upper Paleolithic artefact types occur at Ḥimā sites such as Sha'ib Mahash, while Neolithic finds are ubiquitous.

Stone tools comprise implements made of quartzite, andesite and chert. Ceramic remains of mid-to later Holocene times occur widely, and are especially common at a series of rock tumuli at Najd Sahi, near site MRY11 (see Annex 3 for site locations).



*Figure 3. Stone cairns on mountain top, central Cultural Rock Arts in Ḥimā Najrān.*



*Figure 4. Stone tombs made with dry-laid stone slabs, northern Cultural Rock Arts in Ḥimā Najrān.*

Archaeological data from the Ḥimā area remain limited as no excavations have been conducted to date. However, the intensive traffic of caravans over millennia has resulted in great concentrations of archaeological surface evidence, particularly stone cairns (Figure 3), dry-laid stone tombs (Figure 4), extensive stone arrangements (Figure 5) as well as surface scatters of stone implements and ceramic shards that await detailed evaluation. The continued residential presence of Bedouins in Cultural Rock Arts in Ḥimā Najrān, both in the small township of Ḥimā and at desert camps, adds an important dimension to this nomination.

This is a 'living' cultural area, where rock art continues to play cultural roles and, in some cases, is still being produced. For the local Bedouins the rock art is a source of pride, connecting them with their ancestors and defining their cultural identity (Figure 6).



*Figure 5. Stone arrangement in northern Cultural Rock Arts in Ḥimā Najrān.*

The continued use of the wusūm and the continued reverence of the fertility goddess Alia still link these people to their cultural roots. The principal tribe of the area are the Banū Yām, a large tribe native to Najrān Province. They belong at the western margins of the Empty Quarter, was occupied by the Madhḥig.





Figure 9. Partial view of the rock inscriptions of the *Ḥimā Wells site (HIM02)*.



Figure 10. Aerial view of the *Saidah rock inscription site (HIM01)*.

### 2.a.iii The Six Nominated Sites

Ḥimā Wells comprises two sites of extensive living from the southeastern-most foothills of Jabal Al-Qāra into the sand desert, located c. 8.5 km north-east of Bi'r Ḥimā (see Map 1, p. 3). This was the first site discovered and protected in this region during the Rock Art and Epigraphic Survey of Saudi Arabia last century.

ʿĀn Jamal was recently enclosed by a 610 m long, lockable steel fence. The site is marked by a group of very large angular boulders, which together with the vertical cliffs above them are densely covered by petroglyphs and rock inscriptions (Figure 12).

Arbach et al. (2015) have counted 245 petroglyphs at ʿĀn Jamal, and 438 inscriptions in South-Arabian, Thamudic and Arabic. One of the latter, thought to be between 1300 and 1350 years old, has provided the micro-erosion calibration for southern Saudi Arabia



Figure 11. The main rock inscription Ry 507 of Saidah, high up on the vertical cliff.

(Bednarik and Khan 2005). ʿĀn Jamal has also furnished other important scientific evidence, establishing the most recent presence of surface water, in the form of a pool or lake.

A white calcite accretion has been precipitated from a saturated carbonate solution on the lowest bedrock exposures of the site. Similar deposits can be observed elsewhere in the area, and a sample taken from ʿĀn Jamal, of the sandstone together with the calcite accretion concealing it has been subjected to optically stimulated luminescence analysis (Liritzis et al. 2013). This established that the sandstone was last exposed to daylight  $3580 \pm 250$  years BP, indicating that the last stagnant pool or lake of the area existed between 3800 and 3300 years ago.

This provides an estimate for the time the gradual lowering of the aquifer commenced for the last time, ushering in the region's final desertification phase. Presumably because ʿĀn Jamal was directly on rock inscriptions, both in close vicinity of the historical wells of Bi'r Ḥimā. The five ancient wells of Bi'r Ḥimā are arranged in a V-shaped pattern and about 25 m apart from one another (Figure 7).



Figure 6. Bedouin site custodian Hamad Shanoof Al-Alarjaa proudly showing the Minshaf 2 site, No. IBD02.



Figure 7. Aerial view of the Himā Wells site, at the end of the sealed road, and the inscription site HIM02. The protection fence is clearly visible.

Each well is roughly cylindrical, between 5 and 7 m in diameter and about 20 m deep (Figure 8). These wells are believed to be the oldest in the Middle East, having been in use continuously for at least 3000 years. They are very possibly older, predating the retreat of the aquifer that commenced around 3500 years ago (Liritzis *et al.* 2013). They still provide water today.

During the millennia the wells were in use they provided a focal point for the economy of southern Arabia because all caravans travelling north or south had to provision their water supplies there. This applied also to those caravans that travelled between Yemen and Egypt, which at Himā turned to the northwest. Large armies camped at or near Himā, including those of Himyarite King Yūsuf Dhū Nuwās in



Figure 8. Two of the five historical wells at Bi'r Himā (Himā Wells).

c. 523 CE and Aksumite King Abraha Al-Ashram in c. 570 CE.

The next wells north from Bi'r Himā were those of Al-Jabjab and Murayghān, some 150 km away, and then after another 80 km, the al-Maqar well. Finally, 520 km north of Himā was the well of Sigah (Sijā) in the land of the Nizār. Therefore, Himā was a location of extraordinary importance to the caravans as they skirted the Rub Al Khālī (Robin and Antonini de Maigret 2017).

On a small hill 150 m from the wells (Figure 7) occurs one of the largest inscribed rock panels in the world (HIM02). Along the foot of the cliff and extending over 45 m are 15 Thamudic and South-Arabian inscriptions and 11 South-Arabian monograms, as well as six Arabic graffiti and 95 petroglyphs (Arbach *et al.* 2015). The main area of over 20 m<sup>2</sup> of writing includes the 4 m long inscription Ja 1028 which was written by Himyarite qayl (military commander) Šarah'il dū-Yaz'an during the siege of Al-Ukhdūd (at Najrān) in c. 523 CE (*Qur'an*, Sura Buruj 85, verses 1–7) (Figure 9). At the foot of the slope below the cliff are seven stone tombs. The site is well protected, having long been enclosed by a protective fence of 450 m length (visible in Figure 7).

Jabal Saidah (HIM01) is a small isolated hill 1.3 km southeast of the wells, immediately north of the sealed road leading to Bi'r Himā (Figure 10). It is fenced in by a steel fence of 450 m length and access is via a lockable gate. The site consists of a rock outcrop c. 20 m high and 90 m in diameter.

On its top occur three dry-laid stone tombs and a recent necropolis extends next to the hill. Saidah's main feature is the large inscription Ry 507 high up on the cliff face (Figure 11) and another 43 smaller inscriptions, both Thamudic and South-Arabian. However, there are also numerous petroglyphs, mostly on boulders around the base of the hill.

ʿĀn Jamal (JML01) is a low rocky ridge extend all incoming and outgoing caravan traffic close to Bi'r Himā, a toll station existed there in the past. It accounts no doubt for the concentration of inscriptions and images.





Figure 12. Aerial view of 'Ān Jamal (JML01).

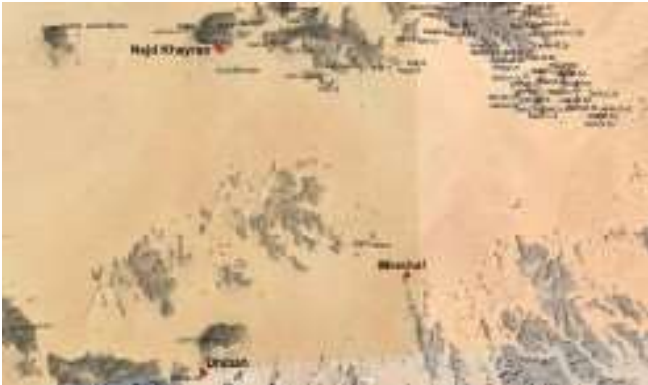


Figure 13. Aerial view of the area north of 'Ān Jamal, showing the locations of the three remaining core areas, Dhibāh 1, Minshaf 2 and Nayd Khayrān.



Figure 14. Two of the presumed elephant images with mahouts at Dhibāh 1 site (DBA01).

several rock art panels, one of the ten sites of the Dhibāh complex. This stretches 2.5 km from west to east, and DBA01 is just 900 m north of 'Ān Jamal (Figure 13). The site consists of a series of large boulders located at the foot of a mountain slope.

As in 'Ān Jamal, there are calcite encrustations on low-lying bedrock, again indicating the former presence of surface water. The site is best known for its presumed depictions of three or possibly four elephants, animals that did not occur in Arabia naturally during the Holocene (Figure 14). One possibility to explain them is that the artist(s) saw elephants elsewhere and depicted them. Elephants have been extinct in the Peninsula since the Middle Pleistocene, the period yielding the 325,000 year old remains of *Elaphus recki* from a palaeolake in the Nafud Desert (Zalmout 2017).

However, the more plausible interpretation of these images is historical. In 570 CE or shortly before, in the 'Ām El-Fil (the 'Year of the Elephant'), Aksumite King Abraha Al-Ashram launched a campaign against Quraysh of Makkah, placing at least one war elephant at the head of his army. In view of the extensive roads of stone slabs constructed to facilitate the passage of elephants it is very likely that several or many war elephants were involved. That army passed through Ḥimā, as evident from rock inscriptions, so it would not be surprising if the exotic animals aroused curiosity among the local people. The Dhibāh 1 site (Figure 15) remains currently unprotected but it is intended to shortly enclose it by a steel fence.

MINSHAF 2 (IBD02) is part of a small site complex about 3.5 km east of Dhibāh 1, located at jabal Idhbah (Figure 15). It is also to be enclosed by a protective fence. The site's dominant features are the large bovid depictions, up to about 2 m long (Figure 6). Their internal body decoration is particularly elaborate. These geometric markings are usually associated with Neolithic cattle depictions in the north of Saudi Arabia, at the rock art complexes of Jubbah, Shuwaymis and Al-Mismā. At Ḥimā, however, their patination implies a considerably more recent antiquity, and these depictions at Minshaf are regarded as being of the Bronze Age, but preceding the final desertification phase. Elsewhere Neolithic rock art does occur in the Cultural Rock Arts in Ḥimā Najrān.

NAJD KHAYRĀN (SAD07) is one of hundreds of sites found among the sandstone stacks to the southeast of jabal al-Qāra. A total of 58 sites have so far been recorded immediately north of and along wādī Saad. The perhaps most outstanding among them is Najd Khayrān, located along the base of a meandering cliff (Figure 16). Its focal point is where during rains a waterfall occurs at an impressive overhang. Thousands of petroglyphs have been created along the escarpment, on the cliffs and on large blocks of sandstone at their base. There are several features of particular interest. In front of the 'waterfall' lies a huge block, about 6 m high, with a steeply sloping flat panel. Dhibāh 1 (DBA01) is a small petroglyph site comprising several rock art panels, one of the ten sites of the Dhibāh complex.

Within a maze of large boulders to the east of the "waterfall" comprising a number of panels of petroglyphs are several depictions of bovids in combination with human figures. In some cases there appear to be interactions between the two, and of particular interest are a few apparent depictions of "bull leaping". This activity is well known from Minoan Crete frescoes of the Bronze Age and from Hittite Anatolia, and claims for the depiction of such practices have been made for rock art as far away as India.



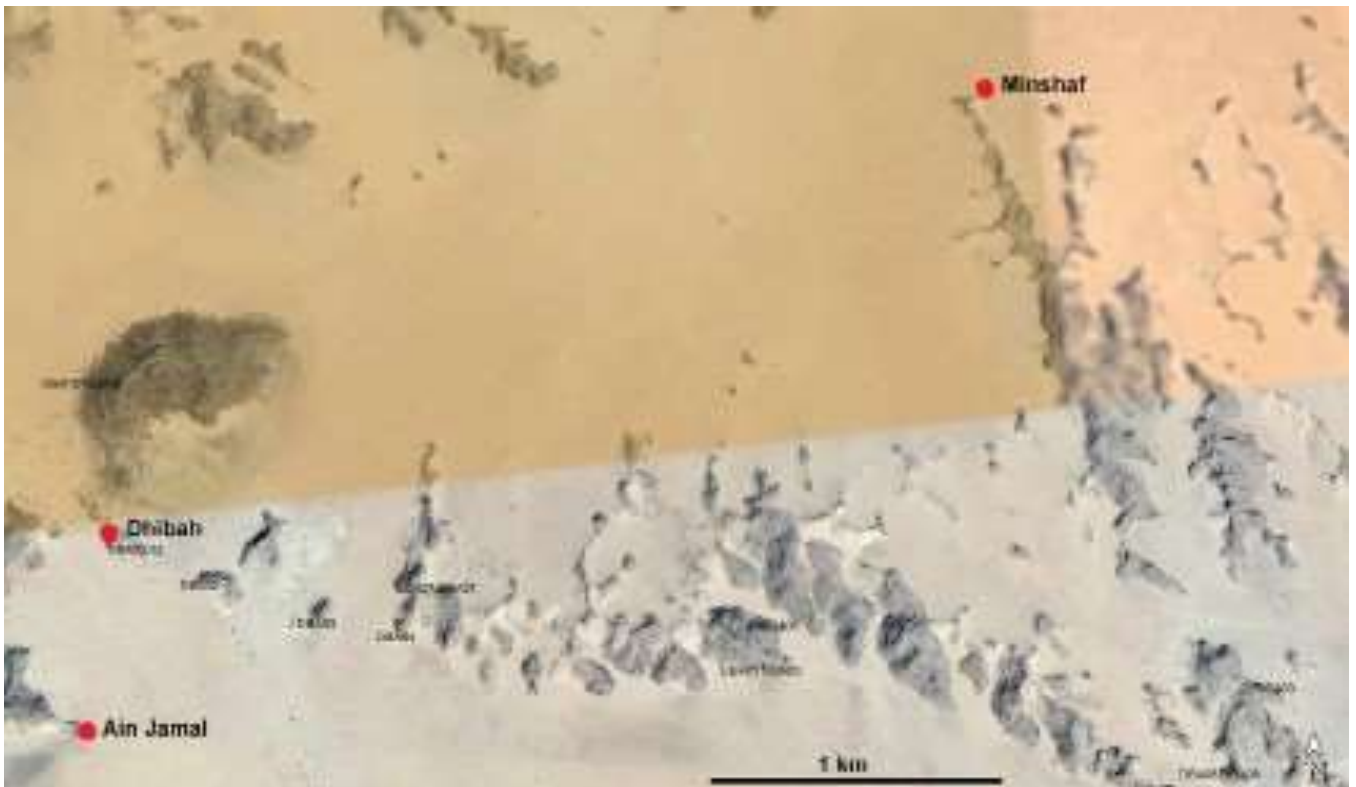


Figure 15. Aerial view of the three core areas 'Ān Jamal, Dhibāh and Minshaf.

It is still today a custom in south-western France (*course Landaise*) and in parts of Spain. Essentially it consists of the custom of jumping over a charging bull, be it as a display of athletic skill or a cultural or religious custom. Since it is feasible that such a practice could have found its way into Arabia and the Najd Khayrān depictions seem rather distinctive, this possibility needs to be considered (Figure 17).

It is suggested that the Najd Khayrān site be developed as a tourism destination. It is extensive and of mostly level access, well suited for the provision of walkways, viewing platforms and possibly wheelchair access. In part the panels form a fairly continuous gallery, appropriate for self-guided tours.

Along the handrails of the walkways, interpretive panels in Arabic and English could be displayed. Most importantly, the site will need to be enclosed in its entirety.

#### 2.a.iv Other sites in the Ḥimā area

In addition to the six sites identified for nomination and special protection, another 545 rock art and inscription sites have been recorded recently in Ḥimā (See Annex 3). The actual number of rock arts and inscriptions remains unknown for all of the sites.

Moreover, it is very likely that more sites remain unrecorded at present. Only 58 of the known sites were registered before 2016, and the canyons and wādīs of jabal Al-Qāra remain largely unexplored in terms of content.

As a theoretical exercise one could assume an average number of motifs for all sites in order to estimate the total number of petroglyphs in the Ḥimā

region. Whatever reasonable number is applied, it needs to be appreciated that the total number of motifs would be in excess of 100,000. If it is considered that the number of known sites is likely to increase further in the years to come, it becomes obvious that this is one of the world's largest concentrations of petroglyphs.

Similarly, the Ḥimā region probably houses the largest corpus of rock inscriptions. In terms of site numbers, the largest complex is currently that of wādī al-Sammā', with 229 registered sites (Figure 18). The wādī al-Sammā' site complex follows the eastern-most extreme margin of the jabal al-Qāra massif, leading to the gap between it and jabal al-Kawkab.

The caravans would have followed this route, travelling past Al-Murayra' rather than skirting Kawkab. It is no doubt this level of traffic over several millennia that accounts for the great number of sites. Another



Figure 16. Najd Khayrān showing the main concentrations of petroglyphs and the location of the 'waterfall' (W).



Figure 17. Apparent depictions of ‘bull jumping’, a practice well-known from Minoan Crete and still current in some parts of south-western Europe; from the site marked 2 in Figure 16, Najd Khayrān petroglyph complex.

rock art complex of significance is that of wādī al-Bayḏā’, west of wādī al-Sammā’, with 26 currently recorded sites.

Of particular interest is site BYD01, where the continuing production of petroglyphs in the region was first demonstrated. This was possible because recent modifications to the site’s main panel proved to be absent in a photograph taken in 1987 by Majeed Khan (Figure 19).

Not only are there modifications to pre-existing images, in this case a large camelid figure has also been added in the last few decades (Figure 19). Since this recent discovery other examples of fresh traces have been found, including additions to the rock art, ‘commentaries’ on it, retracing’s and evidence of cultural use (*Bednarik 2017b*). There are many more rock art sites of great historical or scientific importance in the Cultural Rock Arts in Ḥimā Najrān, and much the same applies to rock inscriptions.

Some examples are the Ta’ar site in a northern wādī of jabal Al-Qāra, where an anthropomorph has been direct-dated by micro-erosion analysis. There are also important sites among the canyons of jabal Al-Kawkab, and around its northern and eastern fringes. Among the latter are major rock art sites, such as those of the Ān al-Halkān site complex, as well as important rock inscription sites.

Two of the Ḥimyarite texts, RY 507 and RY 508, commemorate the siege of Najrān by King Ywsif ‘sī’r Yṭ’r (or Dhû Nuwâs) and date from June and July 633 Ḥimyarite (corresponding to 523 CE), i.e. they concur

with inscription Ja 1028 at Ḥimā Wells.

Another message inscribed next to RY 508 are graffiti attributed to qayl Sharaḥb’īl Yaqbul, son of Shuraḥb’īl Yakmul of the lineage Yaz’an and Jadanum, Ḥabbum, Nas’ān. There is also the image of the soldier Tanim Yazid with his inscription.

A similar design appears next to inscriptions RY 507 and Ry 510, by the same soldier who two years earlier fought with the army of Ḥimyarite King Ma’adīkarib Yafur. Yet another inscription in the area is dedicated to the pre-Islamic god Dhû-Samâwî, the principal deity of the Najrān Region. There are literally thousands of ancient rock inscriptions in the many sites of Jabal Al-Kawkab, and they even include an inscription engraved by Philippe Lippens in 1951.

### **2.a.v Cultural Rock Arts in Ḥimā Najrān**

Khan (2007: 339) estimates that 70.4% of the Saudi rock art he is familiar with consists of zoomorphs, and 21.1% of anthropomorphs, the rest he defines as geometric. As he recognizes himself (2007: 344), his statistics are distorted by uneven research attention in different parts of the country. For instance, he lists the Tabuk Region in the north-west as comprising 27.5% of the nation’s 1106 rock art sites, while the Najrān Region only has 11.4% of the total.

Clearly the rock art of much of the country still needs to be accounted for, and this applies not only to Najrān Region. With hundreds of sites known just in the Ḥimā area, the magnitude of the monument that is the subject of this application becomes evident.





*Figure 18. Petroglyph and inscription panel at wādī al-Sammā' site No. SMA09 02. The central zoomorph has been interpreted as a lion image.*

This is a vast corpus of more than 100,000 petroglyph motifs covering a long period of time. The earliest petroglyphs surviving on the Wajid Sandstone are fully patinated, typically Neolithic zoomorphs and anthropomorphs. Cupules also occur in the early phase.

Unfortunately, no petroglyphs have so far been found on granite exposures, where they could have survived for much longer. Therefore the potential age of Saudi rock art seems determined by its preservation characteristics (Bednarik 1994). The Neolithic rock art, so prominent at the Shuwaymis and Jubbah complexes in Hail Region, plays a relatively minor role at Ḥimā.

It grades into the Chalcolithic and Bronze Age traditions, which offer stylistic similarities. Most particularly, large bovid figures with distinctive and individualized geometric body markings continued to be made. Conditions facilitating the continuation of cattle breeding are attributable to the later onset of the final desertification event in the south, compared to the northern regions of Saudi Arabia.

Cattle require reliable water supplies, and at Ḥimā these were still abundant 3600 years ago, i.e. in the late Bronze Age. At about that time, however, there is a marked change in the faunal elements apparently depicted in the rock art, now emphasizing species that tolerate or even prefer arid conditions. By the advent of the Iron Age this change is complete, and environmental conditions similar to today's seem to be indicated in the rock art iconography.

Another distinctive trend is the increased incidence of portrayals of apparent armed conflict, or at least an emphasis on the depiction of arms, especially presumed swords, daggers and lances. Such representations, either very rare or completely absent in the Neolithic or early Bronze Age, become dominant



*Figure 19. A comparison of a 1987 photograph of a panel at Baydā' 1 (BYD01) with one taken of the same panel in 2017 shows that many modifications and additions have occurred, including changes to the genital areas, feet and legs of the two anthropomorphs.*



with the first millennium BCE, perhaps coinciding with increasing aridity. References to armed violence are still largely absent in the early Thamudic and South Arabian rock inscriptions, but with the first centuries of the Common Era, shortly before the stabilizing introduction of Islam, such texts tell of vast armies camped in the Cultural Rock Arts in Ḥimā Najrān.

The Ḥimā rock art therefore records a microcosm of Arabian history spanning at least 7000 years. The horse was introduced only late in this massive rock art corpus, during the centuries leading up to the Islamic Era. Initially, its depictions are rare, they only become common after Hijra.

Petroglyphs continue to be produced throughout the last 1400 years. This includes anthropomorphs Anati (1968a, 1968b, 1972) defines as 'oval-headed people' and places in his 'pre-literate' period, claiming them to be 3000 to 5000 years old. Some of these can only be a few centuries old, on the basis of patination and superimposition, and all of them are from literate periods (Bednarik and Khan 2005).

Similarly, the female depictions named "Alia" (a pre-Islamic deity) by the Bedouins continued to be produced well into the Islamic era. The portrayals of Alia in the Ḥimā area are of such a distinctive combination of characteristics that they are easily identifiable through the eras. They have been suggested to be related to the early Arab goddess Allat, Al-Ezza and Manat (Trimingham 1979: 18; Zarins et al. 1981: 36).

Of particular interest is the continued use of these representations up to the present time. The images' vulvar cupules or recesses were in many cases modified in recent years, and sometimes small stones were placed in them, perhaps in the course of supplication rituals (Figure 20). In contrast to the goddess Al-Ezza, Alia is of a distinctively feminine personality, with detailed depiction of long hair, narrow waist and wide hips, but inevitably lacking a head or face.

She is always shown with half-raised arms (Figures 1 and 21). Her role was that of a deity of love and fertility. Another factor connecting several rock art traditions in the region over some millennia are the wusūm - ancient tribal symbols or ownership brands still in use today on domestic animals, especially camels.

The tradition of these symbols is certainly more than 2000 years old and may well have begun very much earlier (Khan 2000). Until very recently it was unknown that rock art production has been continued right up to the present time in southern Arabia, or in the Middle East generally. The first solid evidence of such continuity was provided in the Cultural Rock Arts in Ḥimā Najrān, at the site Bayḍā' 1 (BYD01).

A comparison of a photograph taken by Majeed Khan in 1987 with the present condition of the panel

demonstrated that numerous modifications had taken place during that interval. The panel features three main figures attributed to the late Bronze Age: a quadruped zoomorph and two anthropomorphs. The smaller of the latter is interpreted as female, the larger as male. The genital areas and feet of both figures were altered significantly in recent years, and there were fresh peck marks along the legs of the male figure. A large infilled camelid has been added, partially superimposed over the early zoomorph. Interestingly, its lower neck contour follows an engraved line that was already present in 1987, and was then already patinated to the same degree as the three earliest figures.

In other words, it appears that the modern rock artist was prompted by a pre-existing line dating from the Bronze Age to add a camel figure. There can hardly be a more telling demonstration of the continuity of tradition (Figure 19). Moreover, close examination of the remaining motifs on this panel demonstrates the presence of all shades of patina, from the original three figures to the very present.

These conclusions have been confirmed by other very recent findings elsewhere (Bednarik 2017b), including at the al-Mismā complex which was only discovered in 2017 (Bednarik and Khan 2017). There, petroglyphs were certainly still produced in the 20th century, and extensive rock paintings are also of very recent antiquity. In summary, the Ḥimā area features evidence of continuous rock art production for many millennia, of a comprehensiveness hardly found at other sites.

It is a cultural area of continuous and continuing use by the region's Bedouins. Not only does it chronicle their history, it presents a microcosm of the complex historical narrative of the Arabian Peninsula particularly in combination with the immense body of rock inscriptions coinciding with this cultural treasure.



Figure 20. an example of the recent practice of placing small stones in the deep vulvar cupules of Iron Age Alia depictions at Cultural Rock Arts in Ḥimā Najrān sites.

### 2.a.vi The Rock Inscriptions

Some of the Ḥimā inscriptions are among the largest such panels in the world, particularly those at Ḥimā Wells and Saidah (HIM02 and HIM01), located in the Ḥimā townsite (Figure 22). They have long been well protected. Khan's (2007: 345) review of the Saudi rock inscription sites shows the national predominance of the Najrān Region clearly.

According to his statistics, 38.7% of the 17,362 inscriptions then reported in the Kingdom are located in Najrān, one of fourteen provinces forming Saudi Arabia. The recent discovery of hundreds more sites in the Cultural Rock Arts in Ḥimā Najrān could have only increased that percentage greatly. By far the most common inscriptions are those grouped together as Thamudic or South-Arabian.

They account for 59.7% of the total of the rock inscriptions recorded by 2007 in all of Saudi Arabia (Khan *op. cit.*: 358). In second place are Kufic inscriptions (17.9%), followed closely by Southern Musnad scripts (17.5%). Nabatean (3.9%) and Safaitic (1.0%) rock inscriptions are comparatively rare.

Superimpositions imply that Thamudic precedes Southern Musnad writing and is the earliest script in Arabia. Thamudic texts are categorized into five types according to letter forms, vocabulary and direction of writing, called Thamudic A to E (Winnett 1937: 20). Type A is thought to have been introduced in the 6th century BCE, but some see an earlier introduction in the north and the earliest date derived scientifically from a Thamudic letter is  $E2830 \pm 700$  years BP (note large tolerance margin), while another is indeed of the 6th century BCE (Bednarik and Khan 2005).

The Thamudeans certainly existed already in the 8th century as reported by Sargon of Assyria. The last phases of this script, Thamudic C to E, appear to have been in use from the 2nd to the 4th centuries CE. There are essentially two views concerning the origins of alphabetic writing. One school of thought perceives letters developing from wusūm tribal brands (Winkler 1952; Field 1952; Nayeem 2000).

The other school regards scripts as having developed from rock art (Gelb 1963; Driver 1976; Khan 1993). Certainly there is agreement that the Arabian writing systems were not introduced from outside but developed locally. Within the Cultural Rock Arts in Ḥimā Najrān, several forms of alphabetic writing occur: the Musnad al Janubi scripts of 29 letters, the Aramaic-Nabatean alphabet, Southern Thamudic inscriptions, Arabic, Safaitic and rarely Greek.

Bi'r Ḥimā rock inscriptions were initially reported by Jamme (1965, 1966) and later investigated by Zarins et al. (1981), Zarins (1982) and Zarins et al. (1983). In 2002 a Japanese mission led by Kawatoko sought to explore the rock inscriptions of Al-Ḥuṣayba at jabal Al-Kawkab (Kawatoko 2005; Kawatoko et al. 2005), in the first attempt to record Mutsuo one site comprehensively.

It was followed by the painstaking rock inscriptions survey of the Saudi-French Archaeological and Epigraphic Mission in Najrān, commenced in 2007 (Robin 2008, 2010; Robin and Ṭayrān 2012; Arbach et al. 2015). This project is sponsored by the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage, the French Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the French Embassy and the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS-UMR 8167). This work is continuing.



Figure 22. Aerial view of the Ḥimā township, showing the locations of the ancient wells of Bi'r Ḥimā, the Ḥimā Wells inscriptions site (HIM02) and the Saidah rock art and inscriptions site (HIM01).

South-Arabian rock inscriptions in the Cultural Rock Arts in Ḥimā Najrān are mainly thought to be proper names of persons, although there are clearly also instances where this cannot be the case (*Bednarik 2017b*): the name S1lm with the depiction of a "camel" cannot be the name of a person when within a meter there is a smaller "camel" with the words S1lm-wrb-l-Hld (S1lm has given birth to Khālid). Thamudic (a northern variant of South-Arabian of 28 letters) was widely used in variant form in the southwestern regions, including near Ḥimā. Surprisingly, Arabic inscriptions are much less common than the earlier scripts.

Most Arabic texts are characteristic of the first centuries of the Islamic era (Figure 23).

## 2.b History and Development

The human history of the Cultural Rock Arts in Ḥimā Najrān begins with occupation sites of the Acheulian at 'Ān Jamal and Sha'ib Hinmat and possibly even of an earlier Oldowan-like industry. Following this Lower Paleolithic hominin presence, Middle Paleolithic stone tools have also been reported, and Upper Paleolithic artefacts from such sites as Sha'ib Mahash. The Neolithic is represented by rock art and possibly by stone structures.

In the absence of archaeological excavations, only surface finds have been reported and their dating within the Holocene is limited to typological variables. However, the rock art leaves no doubt that the region was occupied continuously since the Neolithic. The rock art of the Property first came to outside attention through an expedition by Philby, Ryckmans and Lippens in 1951–52 (*Ryckmans 1952, 1954; Lippens 1956; Grohmann 1962*).

They traversed the region and took photographs along the route. Using 232 of their photographs, Anati invented a chronology of all Arabian rock art on the basis of selected sites at Ḥimā (*Anati 1968a, 1968b, 1972, 1974*). His proposal has since been reviewed critically.

McClure (1971: 77–80) was the first to note its inconsistencies, but Khan (1998) offered a more detailed review and Anati's chronology was eventually refuted in almost its entirety (*Bednarik and Khan 2005*). From 1979 to 1981, the Rock Art and Epigraphic Survey of Saudi Arabia conducted a first survey of the Ḥimā region, recording several dozen sites (*Zarins et al. 1980*). During 1980 alone, 31 sites were recorded (*Zarins et al. 1981*).

Further sites were added by the Survey during 1983 (*Hester 1984: 115, 124*) and again in 1990 (*Al Kabawi et al. 1990*). During this period, age estimates for the rock art were based on stone tools and pottery shards, but neither their provenance nor their relationship with any rock art can be regarded as secure. In 2004,



Figure 23. The oldest fully Arabic rock inscription known, site No. MRY07, northernmost part of Ḥimā bufferzone.

Bednarik and Khan (2005, 2009) commenced a scientific investigation of Ḥimā rock art.

They provided the first testable rock art dating evidence at the Ta'ar site (TUR01), established a new micro-erosion calibration curve, applied optically stimulated luminescence analysis at 'Ān Jamal (JML01), and they conducted colorimetric sequencing of patina at Najd Sahī. Their work, a collaboration between the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH) and the International Federation of Rock Art Organizations (IFRAO), has been continuing to the present time, with expeditions undertaken as recently as 2017. Site management and protection of the Property have been considered since the work of the Rock Art and Epigraphic Survey of Saudi Arabia in the 1980s, and three sites have subsequently been enclosed in protective fences and equipped with explanatory signs.

Similar measures as well as facilities for the convenience of visitors are planned at three more sites currently. These works will be completed in the course of 2018.



